

PROSPECTIVE INDONESIAN EFL TEACHERS' PROBLEMS IN PLACING VERB STRESS

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Abstract

In creating successful communication, pronunciation is one aspect which should be mastered well by EFL learners, particularly by prospective teachers who will later become role models for their students. One of the essential pronunciation features is stress. Although sometimes neglected, stress is said to have necessary implication for one's speaking skills. This study attempted to reveal the problems in verb stress placement encountered by prospective Indonesian EFL teachers. The data were obtained from the recording of their class presentations. The verbs uttered during the presentations were categorized into verb types depending on the number of syllables, i.e. disyllabic verbs, trisyllabic verbs, and tetrasyllabic (or longer) verbs, and then analyzed in terms of their pronunciation accuracy. From the analysis, it could be concluded that there were two kinds of problems in placing verb stress which the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers encountered, namely they misplaced the stress and they put double stresses on a verb. Most of them put the stress on syllables which could not obtain any stresses, such as suffixes. Meanwhile, some others put double stresses on either trisyllabic verbs or verbs with four or more syllables, where, in fact, such stresses could only be obtained by disyllabic verbs.

Keywords: problems, prospective Indonesian EFL teachers, stress, verb

Introduction

Pronunciation is crucial in facilitating successful oral communication among speakers of English (Baker, 2013; Baker & Burri, 2016; Reid, 2016; Shah, Othman & Senom, 2017). This implies that mispronunciation may cause communication breakdown. Compared to errors on segmental level, errors on suprasegmental level are considered more significant in affecting the success of oral communication (Hussain & Sajid, 2015; Schaetzel & Low, 2009). This happens since such errors yield more intelligibility failure.

English is a stress-timed language, which assumes equal time between stressed syllables (Schaetzel & Low, 2009) and hence undergoes vowel reduction because unstressed syllables will consequently be pronounced more quickly. Arslan (2013, p. 371) claims that "applying the correct stress patterns becomes vital

in producing English words and sentences intelligibly as lack of stress marker or incorrect stress pattern is likely to cause either lack of communication or misunderstanding on the part of interlocutors” (Murphy, 2006; Harmer, 2001). This claim is supported by Kenworthy (1987), who asserts that understanding non-native speakers will be hindered when they put the wrong stress on a word or sentence. Therefore, mastery of word stress is essential to develop good English speaking skill. This situation calls for the need on the part of English language teachers not to neglect pronunciation teaching in their classes (Hariri as cited in Benzies, 2013). English learners should be made more aware of parts which are supposed to be weakly stressed and strongly stressed, which leads to their intelligibility improvement (Hussain & Sajid, 2015).

English has its own stress rule which must be followed by its speakers (Giegerich, 1992). Mastering word stress brings many advantages particularly for English learners as Sabater (1991) argues that “stress and rhythm are suprasegmental aspects that give the overall shape to the word or sequence” (p. 146). Stress misplacement may yield different meanings of a word. By paying attention to stress placement, people can still understand the word although they do not hear it completely. To become a proficient speaker, learners should not only concern with how to pronounce a word but also with other components, such as sounds, stress, and variation in pitch (Kenworthy, 1987). Mastering those components help the learners understand the function of the language in order to convey meanings.

Not all English words should have a stress. Only content words have it. Content words are verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. The current research examines only one type of content words, i.e. verbs. It concentrates on revealing prospective EFL teachers’ problems in placing stress on English verbs. Verb is chosen as the subject of investigation because its existence in a sentence is vital and a sentence will not be complete without a verb.

The investigation of erroneous stress placement has been conducted by a number of researchers. Lepage and Busa (2014) revealed that incorrect stress, together with vowel reduction, could have impact on L2 intelligibility. Ishikawa (2006) investigated the effect of the general noun-verb stress difference in English on stress judgment of English words by Japanese students and tested the effect of syllable structure on the placement of primary stress in novel words. The results of his experimental study indicated that Japanese students made more errors in placing stress on verbs than on nouns. Vafaei, Sadeghpour, and Hassani (2013) showed the tendency that EFL learners were more successful in pronouncing the words whose stress was on the first syllable in comparison to those whose stress was on the second syllable. The current study endeavoured to fill in the lacuna from the previous research and to extend the existing literature on verb stress placement by eliciting problems in verb stress placement encountered by prospective Indonesian EFL teachers.

Literature Review

The following section elaborates relevant theories on English stress placement in general and then stress placement on verbs in particular.

English stress placement

Stress can be identified from more energy put on a sound or syllable, usually greater than other syllables (Jones, 1972). Furthermore, he describes prominence and stress differently. Prominence is the effect of combination among tamber, length, stress, and intonation, while stress only refers to “the degree of force of utterances” (p. 246). Most English words have one or more than one stressed syllables. When an English word – noun, verb, adjective or adverb – has more than one stressed syllables, there will be one “main stress” and the others are “subordinated” (Giegerich, 1992, p. 179).

There are three factors to predict stress (McMahon, 2002), namely (1) stressed syllable has higher frequency, (2) stressed syllable is uttered longer, and (3) stressed syllable is produced with greater intensity. Some English words have only one stressed and one unstressed syllables. However, in the word *entertainment* there are two stresses in the first and the third syllables. Both of them are pronounced with full vowels /e/ and /ei/. In that case, the third syllable of the word *entertainment* has the primary stress, while the first syllable has the secondary stress. Giegerich (1992) states that “secondary stress is stress that is weaker than the main (or ‘primary’) stress but stronger than that of an unstressed syllable” (p. 179).

Stresses in English words may be predicted using the general rules of noun and verb proposed by McMahon (1992). Nouns are usually stressed in the penultimate syllable, the second syllable from the last, if the syllable is heavy. However, if the penultimate syllable is light, the stress falls on the antepenult, third syllable from the last. The examples are *a'roma*, *a'genda*, and *'discipline*. Meanwhile, verbs are usually stressed on the ultimate syllable if the syllable is heavy. If the ultimate syllable is light, the stress is on the penultimate syllable. The examples are *o'bey*, *u'surp*, *'tally*, and *'hurry*.

There are some structures of the syllables which can be described as heavy syllables (Carr, 1993). They are VV, VCC, or VVC, which usually attract stress. Meanwhile, syllables whose structures are V or VC are called light syllables. Some light syllables must obtain stress if no heavy syllable exists. According to Giegerich (1992), when a light syllable takes the stress, it becomes heavy through ambisyllabicity. Ambisyllabicity refers to “a device to make a light syllable become a heavy syllable if there is no heavy syllable available to take the stress” (p.188). Ambisyllabicity is illustrated in the words *de'velop*, *'camera*, *'discipline*, and *A'merica*.

Stress placement on verbs

Stress placement in verbs can be predicted from their number of syllables. For example, verbs which have only two syllables mostly obtain the stress on the first syllable. Although there are some exceptions, the aforementioned rule is one of the rules which makes the speakers easier to utter verbs and to differentiate verbs from nouns.

1. Disyllabic verbs

Most disyllabic verbs have stress on the ultimate syllable (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). However, there are some verbs which have stress on the penultimate syllable. Giegerich (1992) states that the final syllable will be stressed if the word

ends with (a) a heavy vowel (/æ/ and /e/) + a consonant, e.g. *distract* [di'strækt], (b) a long vowel or a diphthong, e.g. *rely* [ri'laɪ], (c) a long vowel + a consonant, e.g. *assert* [ə'sɜ:t], or (d) a vowel + a cluster of two consonants, e.g. *resist* [ri'zɪst].

In line with Giegerich, Roach (1991) explains two rules about disyllabic verbs. He notes that the penultimate syllable of the verbs will be stressed if (a) the final syllable contains a short vowel and has only one (or no) final consonant, e.g. *gather* ['gæðə] and *happen* ['hæpən], or (b) the final syllable contains /əʊ/, like in the words *follow* ['fələʊ] and *borrow* ['bɒrəʊ]. The second rule is the ultimate syllable will be stressed if (a) the second syllable of the verbs contains a long vowel or diphthong, like in the words *abhor* [ə'bɔ:ɹ] and *imply* [ɪm'plaɪ], or (b) the word ends with more than one consonant, such as the words *assist* [ə'sɪst] and *attract* [ə'trækt].

2. Trisyllabic verbs

There are some rules with regard to trisyllabic words. According to Chomsky and Halle (1968), “a verb ending in a non-tense vowel and followed by a single consonant will have a penultimate stress” (p. 69). The examples are *abandon* [ə'bændən] and *consider* [kən'sɪdər]. Further, they state that “a trisyllabic verb can have an ultimate stress if its last syllable contains a long and tense vowel or diphthongs and ends with more than one consonant” (p. 70). *Resurrect* [rezər'ekt] and *correspond* [kɒrɪ'spɒnd] are the examples (Roach, 1991, p. 89). Meanwhile, Levante (1869) states that stress in trisyllabic verbs can fall on the first syllable or antepenultimate if the verbs are formed by the addition of affix *–ed* or *–ing* in disyllabic verbs, such as *watering* and *comforted*. The roots of those verbs have stress on the first syllable so that the addition of affixes *–ed* and *–ing* does not change the stress.

The same condition also happens to trisyllabic verbs which obtain stress in the antepenultimate syllable. The roots of some trisyllabic verbs are disyllabic verbs which have stress on the ultimate syllable, e.g. *im'port*, *con'vict*, *re'mind*, *de'ceive*, and *re'view*. According to Levante (1869), when those verbs are added by affixes *–ed* or *–ing*, the stress does not move. Consequently, the words *imported*, *convicting*, *reminding*, *deceived*, and *reviewed* still have stress on the second syllable, like the stress in the root words. Levante (1869) also states that most verbs ending in *–ish* have penultimate stress, e.g. *ac'complish*, *dis'tinguish*, and *as'tonish*.

3. Verbs with four syllables or longer

“Words with four, five, or six syllables tend to have stress on the middle of the words, rather than on the first or last syllable” (Kenworthy, 1987). This rule also depends on the suffixes in every word because different suffixes have different rules of stress placement. Levante (1869) has previously stated that tetrasyllabic verbs can have stress in the antepenultimate syllable if the verbs are ended by the suffix *–ate*, e.g. *ab'breviate*, *ac'cumulate*, *con'solidate*, and *in'vestigate*. Another characteristic of verbs which obtain stress in the antepenultimate syllable is they end in *–ify*, e.g. *di'versify* and *e'xemplify*. Furthermore, Giegerich (1992) also mentions about pre-antepenultimate syllable, which is the fourth syllable from the end. Some nouns with four syllables obtain stress on the first syllable or on the pre-antepenultimate syllable, such as *'application*, *'evolution*, and *'manufacture*. However, the stress for verbs with four syllables usually falls on the

antepenultimate, such as *an'ticipate*, *co'operate*, *ac'company*, and *e'liminate* (Fu, 1963).

Method

The subjects of the research were seventy prospective Indonesian EFL teachers who were in the third year of their university study. The data were obtained by recording them while they were doing class presentations in groups of four or five people. There was no intervention from the researchers during their presentations. They were selected as the subjects of the research because they had completed all courses related to speaking and pronunciation; thus, they were considered having enough knowledge and practices related to English stress placement.

After the presentations were recorded, the recordings were transcribed and the verbs uttered were listed and categorized based on the number of the syllables. Audacity 1.3 was then used to visualize the pronunciation of the verbs by displaying the length of each syllable, the volume, as well as the pitch. Afterwards, the results were compared with the standard pronunciation prescribed by the dictionary, and the discrepancies which were found revealed the errors in verb stress placement which the prospective EFL teachers made.

Findings and Discussion

From the data analysis, it was discovered that there were two problems in placing verb stress which the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers encountered. The first problem was the speakers misplaced the stress. It means that they put the stresses on the inappropriate syllables. The second problem was the speakers put double stresses (i.e. two main stresses) on a verb.

Misplacing stress

There were many cases of misplacing stress on disyllabic verbs which were produced by the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers during their presentations. From the data, it was found that there were 410 disyllabic verbs uttered during their presentations. Of those 410 verbs, there were 53 words receiving erroneous stress placement. The number constituted 12.93% of the data and the percentage signified that the problem among the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers was not severe. They could be said to have generally mastered the stress pattern of English.

Despite the general mastery, the existence of the errors is worth being given attention because they occurred among future English teachers. Some of them pronounced the disyllabic verbs inappropriately and it resulted in different meanings. To illustrate, the word *differ* should be stressed on the penultimate syllable (Figure 1a). If the stress is given on the ultimate syllable, it must refer to the word *defer*, pronounced as [dɪ'fə(r)], which literary means “to delay something or to postpone.” Yet, the context of the presentation did not allow such interpretation. This is to say that the word to be uttered was *differ* and should be pronounced as ['dɪfə(r)], which means “to be not the same as somebody/something” (Hornby, 1995). Figure 1b shows the appropriate stress placement for the word *differ*. The speaker put more energy on uttering the penultimate syllable and less energy on the ultimate syllable. Louder volume and higher pitch should be

employed to create stress on the penultimate syllable. Meanwhile, in Figure 1a, the speaker put more energy on the ultimate syllable.

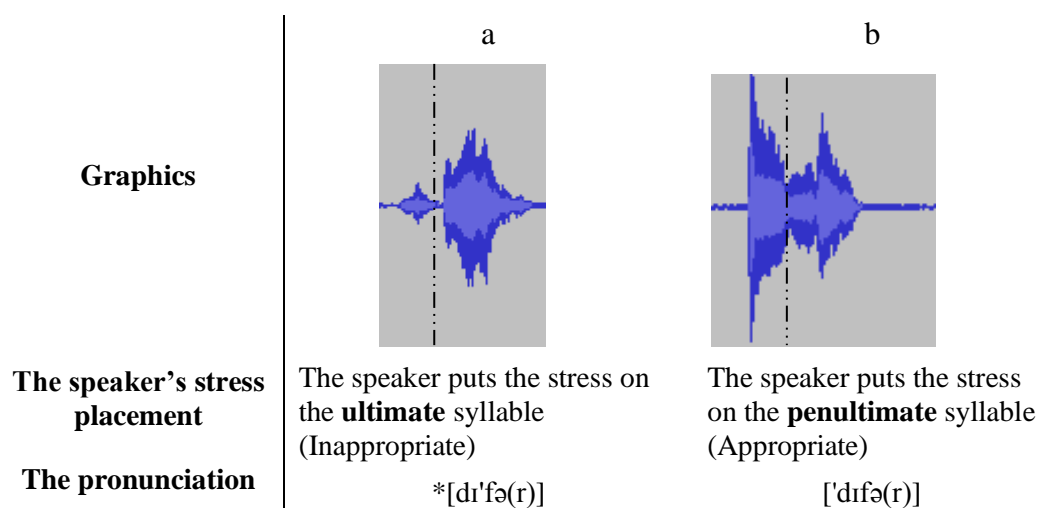


Figure 1. Pronunciations of the Word 'differ'

Another problem which could be seen from Figure 1 is that the speakers stressed the light syllable, which actually should not obtain a stress. Stress in a disyllabic verb mainly falls on the heavy syllable. For example, in the word *differ*, the syllable which should be stressed is the penultimate syllable since the penultimate syllable is heavier than the ultimate. Although Vafaei, Sadeghpour, and Hassani (2013) revealed that English words whose stresses were on the ultimate syllables were more successfully pronounced by EFL learners, the pattern did not seem to apply to the subjects of this research since they still failed to properly pronounce the disyllabic verbs whose stress tend to fall on the ultimate syllables.

Verbs with three syllables or trisyllabic verbs were also found in the data with the total of 178 words. The errors found in this kind of verbs were 60 words or 33.7%. Trisyllabic verbs have two rules of stress. Chomsky and Halle (1968) state that "trisyllabic verbs which end with non-tense vowel and followed by a single consonant will have penultimate stress" (p. 69). The example of the errors of the prospective teachers in observing this rule could be seen in Figure 2.

The word *deliver* is an example of a trisyllabic verb which ends with a non-tense vowel and is followed by a single consonant so that it should have penultimate stress. However, on this word, some of the speakers put the stress on the ultimate syllable. Figure 2a shows that the syllable '-ver' was uttered with more energy. The pitch was higher than the antepenultimate and the penultimate syllables. Even more, the penultimate syllable obtained the tertiary stress. It was different from Figure 2b. When the speaker uttered the word *deliver* with correct stress placement, the higher pitch would be placed on the penultimate syllable.

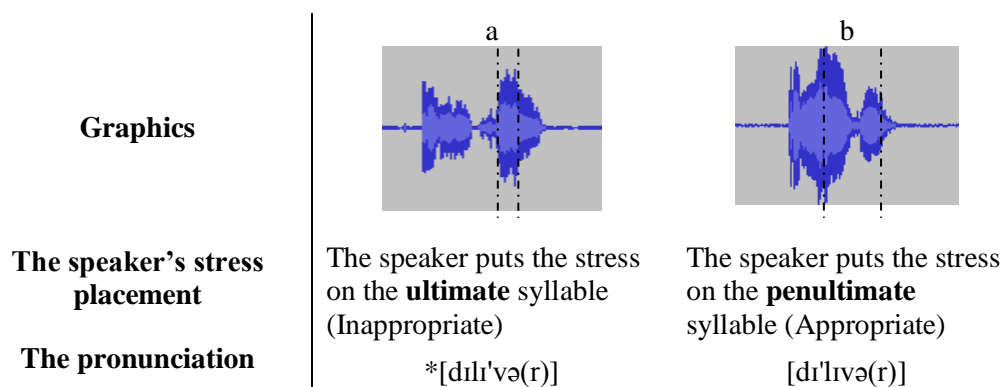


Figure 2. Pronunciations of the Word 'deliver'

The second rule of stress placement in trisyllabic words proposed by Chomsky and Halle (1968) is that a trisyllabic word can have a final stress if its last syllable contains a long and tense vowel or diphthongs and ends with more than one consonant. For example, the word *introduce* should have stress on the final or ultimate syllable because this word ends with a long and tense vowel. Nonetheless, some speakers put the stress on the antepenultimate syllable like what can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3 consists of two graphs which represented the stress on the verb *introduce*. Figure 3a represented the stress on the antepenultimate syllable. The antepenultimate syllable obtained higher pitch and longer length than the penultimate and the ultimate syllables although the difference was not significant. Meanwhile, in Figure 3b, the pitch and the length were higher and longer in the ultimate syllable.

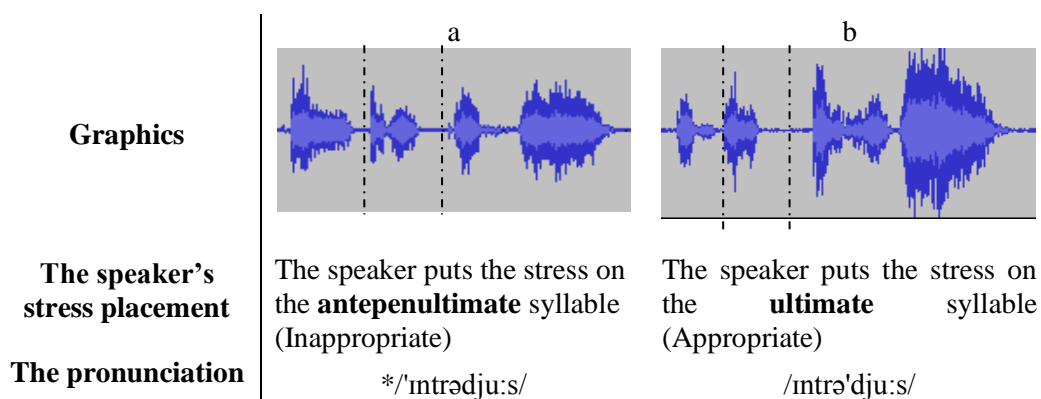


Figure 3. Pronunciations of the Word 'introduce'

There were also some trisyllabic words obtaining different stresses from the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers. The examples were the words *analyze* and *emphasize*. The appropriate stress placement of *analyze* should fall on the antepenultimate syllable (Figure 4c). In spite of this, one speaker put the stress on the penultimate syllable and some on the ultimate syllable. Figure 4 presents two graphs showing the inappropriate stress placement of the word *analyze* in Figure 4a and Figure 4b. In the first graph, the speaker put the stress on the syllable 'na.' Meanwhile, in Figure 4b, the syllable 'lyze' obtained the main stress.

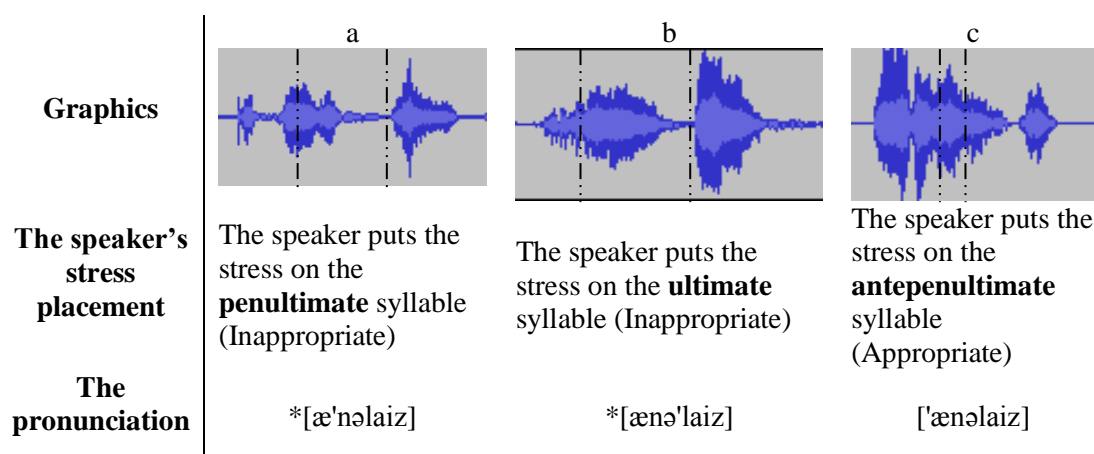


Figure 4. Pronunciations of the Word 'analyze'

Tetrasyllabic verbs uttered by the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers were not as many as disyllabic or trisyllabic ones. Of 70 speakers, there were only 36 tetrasyllabic verbs found. Fifty three percent of them was stressed incorrectly. Most tetrasyllabic verbs were words with suffixes. Stress could be predicted based on the suffixes which were added to the word. Kenworthy (1987) states that there are many suffixes which cause the stress to fall on the syllable before the suffix. Furthermore, according to Levante (1869), verbs ending in *-ify* obtain stress on the antepenultimate syllable. The examples were the words *intensify* and *identify*. Some speakers misplaced the stress on those two words, i.e. they put the stress on the final or ultimate syllable.

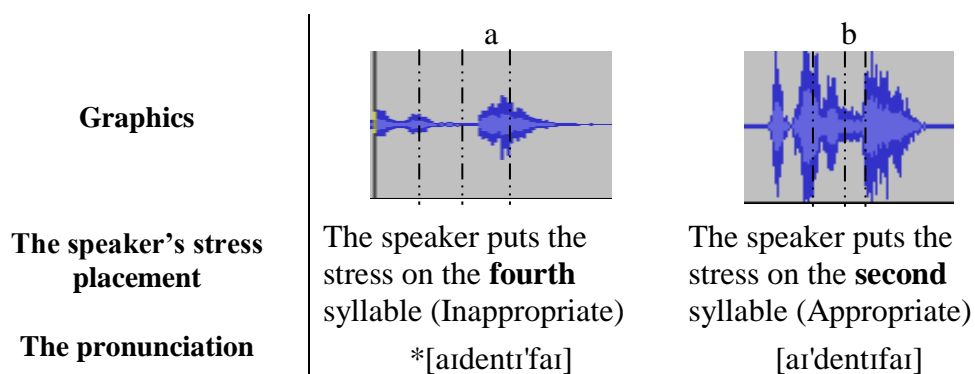


Figure 5. Pronunciations of the Word 'identify'

The first graph of Figure 5 represents the stress misplacement on the word *identify*. The speaker put the stress on the ultimate syllable, i.e. the suffix. As a matter of fact, it is not allowed since suffixes could not obtain any stress. Furthermore, suffix *-ify* is a type of suffix which makes the stress fall on the syllable before the suffix itself. The second graph represents the appropriate stress placement for the word *identify*, which falls on the antepenultimate syllable. From the graph, it is obviously seen that the speaker put the stress on the antepenultimate syllable. Although the length of the pre-antepenultimate and antepenultimate syllables was almost the same, the pitch and the intensity were different. The antepenultimate syllable was produced with higher pitch and greater intensity.

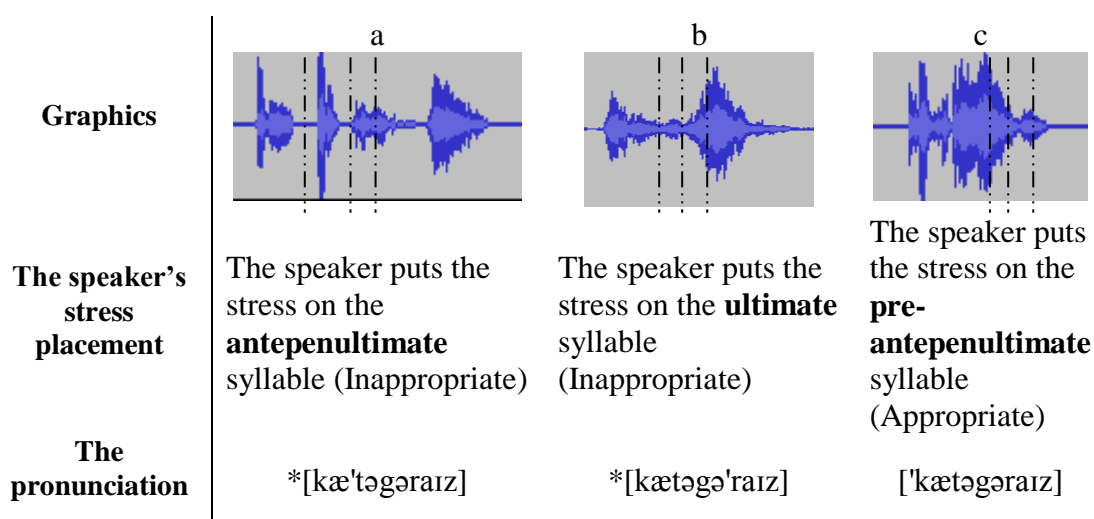


Figure 6. Pronunciations of the Word 'categorize'

Figure 6 represents the speaker's pronunciations of the word *categorize*. The second graph shows the different degrees of utterance which were obtained by the pre-antepenultimate and the ultimate syllables. It is clearly shown that the ultimate syllable obtained higher pitch than the other syllables. Besides, the speaker also uttered the ultimate syllable longer and with greater intensity, while actually the ultimate syllable should not obtain any stress since it is a suffix. A different pronunciation of the word *categorize* is shown in the third graph. The speaker uttered this word with appropriate stress placement, which falls on the pre-antepenultimate syllable. Unfortunately, Figure 6a does not show clearly the differences among those four syllables. However, by listening to the recording, the researchers concluded that the main stress was obtained by the antepenultimate syllable. The word *categorize* comes from a noun *category* which has stress on the pre-antepenultimate syllable. Suffix *-ize* is a suffix which does not change the stress placement of the word. It means that although the word *category* becomes *categorize*, the stress placement still falls on the pre-antepenultimate syllable.

During their presentations, the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers also uttered verbs with more than four syllables. An example of these was *differentiate*. *Differentiate* comes from the word *different* which is added by a suffix *-iate*. The suffix changes the part of speech of the word from noun into verb. From Figure 7a, it can be seen that the speaker put the stress on the syllable /tʃi/ whereas actually this syllable is included in the suffix. Therefore, in the word *differentiate* the suffix is on two syllables, which were the penultimate and the ultimate syllables. Because suffix *-iate* causes the stress to fall on the syllable before the suffix, the stress of this word should be on the antepenultimate syllable like what has been shown in Figure 7b. The first syllable of Figure 7b also obtained high pitch, but the length and the intensity were obtained longer and greater by the antepenultimate syllable. Therefore, it was concluded that the speaker put the stress appropriately on the antepenultimate syllable and the first syllable obtained the secondary stress. It differs from the word *different*, which obtained stress on the first or antepenultimate syllable. Since suffix *-iable* had been added, the stress shifted to the third syllable.

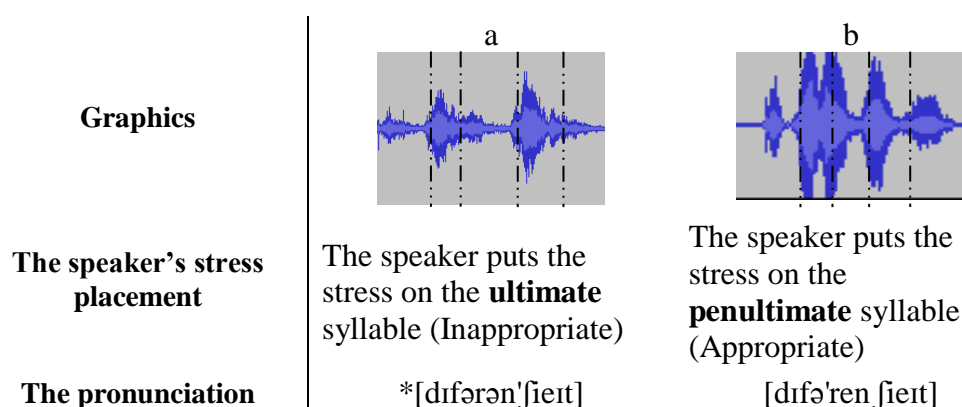


Figure 7. Pronunciations of the Word 'differentiate'

Putting double stresses

There was another problem which was unveiled from the data analysis. Some speakers pronounced some verbs with more than one primary stress. It means to say that they put double stresses on a verb. Two stresses with the same degree of utterances usually happened to disyllabic verbs. English disyllabic words could obtain two primary stresses when both syllables were heavy syllables, if not, there should be only one primary stress. However, in this circumstance, the speakers did not put two stresses on disyllabic verbs. They put it on a trisyllabic verb and a tetrasyllabic verb instead.

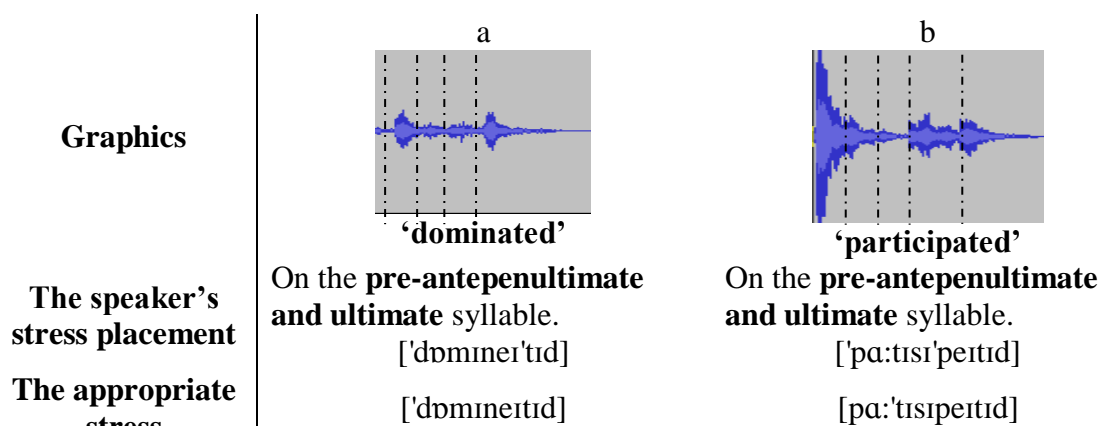


Figure 8. Double Stressing on Verbs

From Figure 8a, it is seen that the speaker uttered the word *dominated* with two stresses. The first stress fell on the pre-antepenultimate syllable and the second stress fell on the suffix *-ed*. The speaker put the same effort to those two syllables, so that none of them was the secondary stress. The word *dominated* only has one stress which falls on the antepenultimate syllable. Suffix *-ed* does not change the stress placement of the word nor obtain a stress. The same rule also applies to the word *participated*. In Figure 8b, it can be seen that the speaker put the stresses on the pre-antepenultimate and the ultimate syllables while the word is supposed to receive the stress on the third syllable.

Conclusion

The research unveiled that there were two problems faced by prospective Indonesian EFL teachers when they were placing stress on verbs. First, they tended to misplace the stress. They mostly put stresses on the suffixes, which in fact could not obtain any stresses. Second, they put double stresses on trisyllabic and tetrasyllabic (or longer) verbs. Although the research demonstrated that verb stress placement had generally been mastered by the prospective Indonesian EFL teachers, a sufficient amount of attention still needed to be paid to errors which were still found. This is vital since they later will become English teachers who eventually provide language model for their future students. Additionally, increasing the continuous awareness of prospective Indonesian EFL teachers of appropriate stress placement, not only on verbs, is of chief importance.

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